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ABSTRACT

How can broadcast educators teach student practitioners of the 1990s and beyond to attain a fresh viewpoint, especially during on-air announcing performance, the traditional entry point for most careers? Speech performed by music radio announcers under "ad-lib" on-air conditions creates a "theater of the mind" visualization within the listener based on a shared frame of reference. Examples demonstrate creative and uncreative announcing styles. Educators can use six strategies to help students unlock the doorways of their personal creativity: (1) get students to tell stories; (2) teach students where to locate "show prep" material and how to add a punchline to it; (3) train students to perform their material in visual terms, with colorful words and descriptive detail; (4) teach students how to create a memorable character; (5) encourage emulation by listening to carefully selected airchecks whose performers model creativity; and (6) encourage prospective announcers to become involved in creative activities beyond radio. (Five notes are included; 19 references are attached.) (SR)

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ON-THE-AIR IN THE NINETIES: THE ROLE OF CREATIVITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT RADIO ANNOUNCERS

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ON-THE-AIR IN THE NINETIES: THE ROLE OF CREATIVITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT RADIO ANNOUNCERS

STEVEN SHIELDS

If ever a time existed for fresh and innovative thinking within the radio broadcasting industry, the 1990's are that time.

"A typical radio station is today little more than an electronic jukebox, transmitting a stereotyped format of recorded music, commercials and promotional announcements," declared Ellis (1988). This "unimaginative amalgam sounds pretty much the same in thousands of communities. From Albuquerque to Zanesville, they're playing the same songs, running the same contests, cracking jokes supplied by the same comedy service" (p. 53).

Why is this so? One explanation, according to Ellis, lies in understanding the economic forces operating both internally and externally upon the contemporary radio industry. As in many other industries, the majority of today's highly-leveraged broadcast owners and operators who came aboard during the market-driven Eighties are still looking for internal downsizing while at the same time trying to produce huge short-term profits.

But although such an economic argument is quite powerful in explaining some of the radio industry's infatuation with automation and product standardization, at least another explanatory factor may lie in the industry's decreasing attention to creativity and innovation as a communication competency for its own personnel.

Marketplace forces, for example, do not explain away the contradictory finding that while the average radio announcer is quite low in creativity (Shields, 1990a), announcer salaries continue to rise (New surveys, 1990; NAB-BFMA survey, 1988).[1] One would expect a correlation between low wages and low levels of creative ability, though none has been found (Shields, 1988).

Furthermore, while a 26-percent increase in the number of radio stations on-air since 1982 might lend some credence to the industry's passionate embrace of station automation, it should be noted that many of these new stations were licensed under FCC Docket 80-90 to small communities that had theretofore never had a local broadcast service. It seems difficult to justify such an exclusive reliance on automation in such stand-alone markets solely on competitive grounds (Harwood, 1989; Ellis, 1988).

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But it would be unfair to tar the radio industry if creativity is indeed an essential ingredient missing from the on-air mix of contemporary radio. The role of the broadcast educator is perhaps equally worth inspecting.

As only one indicator that much work remains to be done both in and out of the broadcasting classroom, a 1986 national survey underwritten by the Dow Jones Newspaper Fund showed only 32 percent of students who had majored in broadcasting landed fulltime jobs in their chosen field after graduation (Gersh, 1987).[2] The most recent 1988 study shows a sharp decline in the number of students who are engaged in extracurricular experiences with campus media (Gersh, 1989).

Clearly, many of the students who command the energy and attention of broadcast educators are not succeeding in the job marketplace after graduation. And since many of today's announcing students ultimately become tomorrow's air talent, program directors, and general managers, a parallel may be established.

Perhaps the radio industry's current lack of creativity is traceable in part to a lack of attention to the teaching of creativity competencies to contemporary announcing students, both in the university classroom and behind the scenes at campus media outlets. Broadcast educators who assume that a knowledge of broadcasting hardware and a familiarity with mechanical technique is sufficient for entry-level industry employment may be doing their students a disservice by not encouraging the development of the creative software that resides between the student's two ears.[3]

The question becomes, then: How can broadcast educators teach student practitioners of this decade and beyond to attain a fresh viewpoint, especially during on-air announcing performance, the traditional entry point for most radio careers?

A helpful beginning might be to consider the theoretical and definitional issues that apply to this question, followed by some examples of creative and uncreative on-air styles. Culminating this discussion are some preliminary suggestions for broadcast educators interested in promoting a more creative approach to on-air performance among their announcing students.

CREATIVITY AND ANNOUNCING

Of the multitudinous number of theories regarding creativity, which range from the philosophical (Kneller, 1965) to the physiological (Katz, 1978) to the psychological (Freud, 1949: Staats, 1968), the psychologically-based humanistic personality theory most closely underlies the notion that radio announcing students can be taught to engage in creative communication competencies.

In the humanistic personality tradition, creativity is seen as a conscious individual attempt to become more self-actualized and mentally healthy (Maslow, 1954, 1968; Rogers, 1962). In

this view, creativity is not something one is "born with" in fixed amounts; rather, one learns to express creative ability in a self-fulfilling manner.

Given such a theoretical orientation, what does it mean to be a creative radio announcer? Specifically, it is the notion that speech performed by music radio announcers under ad-lib (extemporaneous) on-air conditions taps into what has always been considered to be radio's chief power as a medium: the ability to evoke a "theater of the mind" visualization within the listener based on a shared frame of reference between the communicator and the listener. Doing so evokes a positive shared mental experience between the communicator and the audience.

This shared experience is established in part by the communicator through word choices and vocal tone colorings that convey visual information in an aural manner, evoking powerful internal experiences that color the palette of the listener's imagination. By interacting to construct this "mind theater," a powerful form of intrapersonal communication occurs.

EXAMPLES OF UNCREATIVE ANNOUNCING STYLES

As for examples, one need not listen to contemporary radio very long to spot examples of announcers who seem more preoccupied with the sound of their own voice than with conveying information in any personal fashion to the listener. In years past, there were the "time and temp" jocks, whose every record introduction break sounded something like this:

> "WZZZ, I'm Joe Blow! It's 66 degrees at 4:05!"

This was usually followed by:

> "WZZZ, hi, I'm Joe Blow! It's 66 degrees at 4:08!"

And so on, ad nauseum, throughout the hour.

A variation on this is the "Wednesday afternoon format," where every break is some variation of the following:

> "WZZZ, it's Joe Blow with you on a beautiful Wednesday afternoon." Or,
>
> "WZZZ, Joe Blow on your Wednesday afternoon with the latest song from Some Strange Group."

A step up the scale in more contemporary settings is the "liner jock," whose every break is a verbatim reading of a scripted station promotional announcement or slogan line. Although sometimes delivered with great enthusiasm, these announcers nevertheless frequently sound robotic and impersonal.

As an example: "WZZZ, Joe Blow on Anytown's All-Hit Music Station!" or "WZZZ, The station that gives you another opportunity to win big in the million dollar dreamhouse contest sometime this hour!" Or, "WZZZ, where you're in the middle of another maximum music sweep!"

It should be observed that many stations hire large-market announcing talent outside the station to prerecord their liners. This allows the station to offer the audience "jock relief" by simply dropping-in these prerecorded liners over the beginnings of records, which may follow one after another for an extended time period in a "music sweep" fashion. Accordingly, it may not be unusual for a listener to encounter the local announcer only two or three times in a given hour, especially if the station also values the playing of records one after another with no talk at all (known as "segueing").

Of course, many of these "liner jocks" find themselves working for the electronic jukebox operations that Ellis decried. But other announcers--especially those who have burned out--sometimes rely on them exclusively too, even though station management might prefer for them not to do so (Shields, 1990b).

EXAMPLES OF CREATIVE ANNOUNCING STYLES

One example of a contemporary announcer whose creativity is expressed through the telling of sometimes lengthy (and occasionally risque) stories during his highly-rated morning show on WWDC-FM, Washington, D.C. is Douglas Tract, better known as the Greaseman:

(A commercial ends, Greaseman is doing a weather forecast).

> "Nothing gonna get us down today, it's so warm and nice, so reminiscent of my time SOUTH OF THE BORDER!

(The sound of a late-Seventies Spanish-flavored disco song, Santa Esmerelda's 'Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood,' suddenly appears as a musical background. The vocal pace increases to an urgent tempo)

> "Vamos, muchachas! Me no muerte! As fun as it is going down there to Mexico, I still feel kinda funny--you probably will too, once you travel outside the United States. You take so many things for granted. You know, you know--you're not afraid of the police here. You know, the policeman is your friend, right? Isn't that what we always learned? Well, I tell you what--one time when I was down there in Tijuana, and Estelle and I were in the hotel room, suddenly there was a knock on the door

(SFX: door knock):

'Police!' And I thought 'Oh my GOD!' Estelle looked at me and I looked at her. I said 'Estelle--'

(SFX: door banging)

'Police!' Open the door!' I said, 'Estelle, they've probably got some trumped-up charge--they saw us walking around, flashing a wad of bills and they'll keep me locked up in jail and I'll be squealing like a pig for twenty years and nobody'll be able to get me out and you'll have to call the American consul.' I said, 'No way, Estelle.' And I reached into the bottom of my suitcase, I took out my Magnum, and

(SFX: gunshots).

I put three through the door, I said 'Come on--out the window!' So we jumped out the window just as they splintered down the door. We were running down the street, the Federales chasing us, I fired a couple

(SFX: gunshots).

We jumped in a car, and we took off right down the main market street, where they had trays set up with all these goods. And we're knockin' people outta the air, and I'm driving as fast as I can, poppin' that clutch, people were flying up in the air, I'm knockin' the white souvenir carts of sombreros everywhere I went, into a playground with little kids, and they're squealin' and splatterin'--it was awful! Ah hah hah! From time to time it was

(SFX: gunshots).

I lean over my shoulder and I fire three back as they pursue us in their little Tijuana car. Finally, we got to the Rio Grande, and splush splush, we jump in and we swam across, bullets are zingin' the water all around us--finally, we made it back to Texas (sigh). God it was awful!

You can imagine my shock and horror the next day when I picked up a copy of the *Amarillo Times* and the headline read: 'Unknown American tourist goes berserk in Tijuana--when police knock on door to SELL HIM TICKETS TO THE POLICEMAN'S BALL"

(Next record begins).

To get an accurate idea of how this sounded, it should be noted that this scenario was performed in less than two minutes (1:56).[4] Of course, vocal shadings and stresses on many of the key words are difficult to fully transcribe, but the flavor of creativity in this excerpt from one of the Greaseman's shows should be evident.

Other announcers who exemplify this on-air approach include Rick Dees, morning host of KIIS-FM, Los Angeles. Much of Dees' humor relies on his ability to use various dialects and character voices to affectionately populate the studio with his "cast of idiots."

Another morning man, Scott Shannon, late of WPLJ-FM, New York and KQLZ-FM, Los Angeles, also exemplifies on-air creativity. Shannon was also instrumental in creating the "Morning Zoo" format and disseminating it from Z-100, New York to the rest of the radio world.

In short, a multitude of radio announcing talents exist who have refined their creative competencies into an entertainment artform, though they typically are heard in the largest metropolitan areas where the largest financial rewards invariably accrue.

CREATIVE COMPETENCIES FOR ANNOUNCERS: SOME SUGGESTIONS

As examples from the preceding section demonstrate, to succeed as an announcer ultimately requires the student or novice to make a creative leap. Bornstein (1984) has suggested that the timing of this leap may occur at a point in an announcer's career when initial goals and expectations have been realized, perhaps after the first decade passes.

The timing of this leap perhaps explains broadcast educators' predilection for training students at an entry-point level of skill. Initially, dependability and mechanical competencies may be more valued than creative ones (Shields, 1990c).

Perhaps the best strategy broadcast educators can adopt is to plant the seeds of creative competency in the hopes that they will flower "on time." This strategy takes nothing away from the conventional view among broadcast educators that students ought to be able to run an audio board and use a microphone; rather, this strategy adds to that thinking by showing students how to unlock the doorways of their personal creativity.

Here are some crowbars to help pry open those doorways:

(1) GET THEM TO TELL YOU A STORY. I use this technique the very first day of announcing class, much as some basic-speech instructors might utilize a speech of introduction: Students come forward, introduce themselves, and tell us a complete story (beginning, middle, and conclusion) on an assigned topic in one minute.

I have found the best topics for this exercise to be whimsical ("tell us a story about green

goldfish/cowboys/hiccups/cars/a briefcase that was lost/the Navy/stars/trash/art/war/breakfast cereal") Sometimes I ask them to tell me their story using a character voice or accent (British, Swahili, a ten-year-old, Tony the Tiger).

This introductory experience serves several purposes. First, students begin to associate announcing with the ability to think swiftly in an ad-lib setting and to utter a coherent discourse in front of an audience. Second, they begin to associate announcing with content that departs radically from the usual time-and-temperature or liner materials they typically hear on the air. Third, it begins to acquaint them with the need to deal with performance pressure, an integral part of announcing work. Fourth, it promotes the value of a personal kind of sharing with the audience by the announcer, instead of reinforcing robotic "jockitis." Finally, it allows some very early differentiations to be made among class members who might need more help than others.

(2) TEACH THEM WHERE TO LOCATE "SHOW PREP" MATERIAL AND HOW TO ADD A PUNCHLINE TO IT. Students often naively assume that announcers just walk into the air studio and somehow pull an outstanding show "off the top of their heads." In truth, a great deal of off-air preparation usually precedes on-air performance of creative ideas. The best announcers prepare their next show, often beginning as soon as the last show is over.

It takes some prompting, then, for students to begin considering themselves as information processors, where almost anything from their personal experience is grist for a creative comment. This requires them to become keener observers of the human condition and to reconsider their reading habits to include a wider range of materials.

For example, is the station playing any music by Some Strange Group? Lo and behold--there's a blurb about them in this week's *People* magazine--better cut it out and save it for the next time you have to play one of their records.[5] And if wacky humor is desired, no better inspiration exists than supermarket tabloids with tales of two-headed space aliens and Elvis sightings.

Personal observations are often fleeting things; students need to be encouraged to make notes about them before they are lost in the depths of the mental toybox. One announcer I knew carried a clipboard around with him to capture his thoughts as they occurred (not recommended while driving, by the way). I knew another who kept a tape recorder by his bedside to capture late-night musings (which were usually incoherent; this itself became a daily show feature when he would play them back with hilarious results).

But what separates information gathering from true show-prep material is the ability to punctuate the thought with a punchline. Without a punchline, the most interesting comment

about a band, band member, record, or event at best seems to sort of hang there in the airwaves, almost begging for someone to finish it. Indeed, it may be worth wondering about when audience researchers find listeners complaining about "too much disc jockey chatter" to uncover whether listeners object to all talk, entertaining or otherwise, or whether their ire is really directed at lame commentary with no satisfactory concluding punchline.

Teaching students to write punchlines to their material is difficult, mostly because of certain initial tendencies they have to be disabused of.

A national program director I once worked for remarked one day in a critique session that the easiest punchlines to form are "dirty" ones. If so, this introduces a taste issue that needs to be addressed between instructor and student, especially given the on-going debate between the radio industry and the FCC over indecency. My preference is to encourage students to think past the first punchline, especially if it is scatological. Write it down, then forget it. What else is there to say? Use that instead.

Another tendency among student announcers is to try to form punchlines by associating the material with record titles or names of artists the station is playing. These associations often make a sort of weak pun; again, students should be encouraged to get the early association out of the way and to dig a little deeper into their thinking for a better punchline.

Finally, students usually have to be gently encouraged not to fall habit to the crutches of either (a) laughing at their own jokes, (b) repeating their punchlines, as if to flag down a comatose audience's attention, (c) punctuating their punchlines with sound effects, canned laughter, ducks quacking, et cetera, and (d) trying to "top" themselves with a second, third, or even fourth punchline once the initial one is delivered.

Fortunately, there are any number of humor services available for aspiring radio comedians, often found in the back pages of industry publications like *Radio and Records*. These humor services are perhaps best viewed as a source of punchlines waiting to be attached to a piece of show prep material. Students may also find library holdings with jokes or trivia tidbits that may be suitable substitutes. Regardless of the source, show prep material definitely needs a good punchline.

(3) TRAIN THEM TO PERFORM THEIR MATERIAL IN VISUAL TERMS, WITH COLORFUL WORDS AND DESCRIPTIVE DETAIL.

Like poetry, good announcing must invoke a visualization quickly. Accordingly, techniques used by poets might prove useful to students of announcing. Metaphors, similes, and word pictures

can add to the meaning of even the most pedestrian content. A weather forecast that simply reads "Rain likely today, high 65 degrees" might evolve into "Did you see that weird looking green-and-black sky this morning? Looks like a swell day to ride your broom around--and while you're doing that, some of the rest of us will have newsprint on top of our hairlines since we left home without an umbrella, thus giving new meaning to the word "headlines...."

(4) TEACH THEM HOW TO CREATE A MEMORABLE CHARACTER.
Radio announcers change their names for a variety of reasons. Some program directors in less enlightened times used to suggest to announcers with any hint of ethnic extraction that they might want to adopt a more "mainstream" name. Some radio companies have had a stock set of names that were used by various personnel, e.g. the morning announcer was always named "Clyde Coffee" whether he was the first or the fifty-first announcer to fill that station's time slot. Still other announcers eventually decide that not using their real names on the air prevents annoying phone calls at home from overly-persistent "fans."

Regardless of the reason, the departure from one's real name also signals a departure from one's "true" persona and allows the beginnings of radio character-building--not in the ethical sense (though that, too, is important), but in the sense of creating an alter-ego that allows an announcer to perform in ways that may be antithetical to his or her "real" persona.

May (1979) has several useful suggestions for forming a character for radio (pp. 76-79). May suggests students compose a "radio characterization essay" to flesh out their progeny by describing as fully as possible how the character behaves in a variety of settings: What does the character wear? Eat? What kind of car does the character drive? Hobbies? How would the character behave at a concert, at a party, on a date, in the boss's office?

Generally, May concludes, the more detail that can be devoted to the character, the more believable the character will become to the audience. And once the character is established, it is not a far jump to create several others, using different vocal features (or character voices) for each.

(5) ENCOURAGE EMULATION BY LISTENING TO CAREFULLY SELECTED AIRCHECKS WHOSE PERFORMERS MODEL CREATIVITY. Students should be encouraged at first to obtain these themselves, since most students own a cassette deck and an FM tuner these days. It is interesting to see what students bring in when you ask them to find an example of a really creative announcer. This can lead to profitable class discussions as students search out the attributes of creative performers.

There are also a number of aircheck services available, whose producers can supply instructors with samples of announcers in almost any market (Ogles, Shields, & Howard, 1987). A modern

trend has been not only to record these announcers on-air on audiotape, but to record their in-studio activities on videotape. These "video airchecks" are a visual treat for students and help demonstrate the myriad tasks involved in the successful execution of a preplanned creative bit.

(6) FINALLY, ENCOURAGE PROSPECTIVE ANNOUNCERS TO BECOME INVOLVED IN CREATIVE ACTIVITIES BEYOND RADIO. One would think that if enjoyment of music were a partial attracter for a radio career, many announcers would be accomplished musicians. But in my experience, just the opposite was usually true.

It might be worth suggesting to students, then, that any creative activity engaged in, whether related to airwork or not, might help open their creative channels. By encouraging students to explore painting, music, dance, creative writing, or other forms of creative expression, an enjoyable avocation may linger after the radio industry is but a memorable backward look.

In conclusion, the key to teaching creative competencies to radio announcing students lies in advocating patience, practice, and persistence. Neophytes sometimes take a long time to flower; it may be a decade before an announcer's career plateaus and the entry way to the next level is sought. Creative expression, while learnable, is like many other skills: Practice is essential to success. And not every station will encourage or even allow much creative expression: Finding Shangri-La requires persistence.

But for those who are patient, practice, and persist, a self-fulfilling and financially rewarding radio career awaits.

NOTES

[1]The average air talent salary in 1990 was $22,418, according to a joint survey of the National Association of Broadcasters and the Broadcast Cable Financial Management Association (New survey, 1990). The figures were released in the associations' 1990 radio financial report.

[2]But this is comparable to the 34.3 percent of 1988 journalism and mass communication students who found fulltime employment in the newspaper industry (Gersh, 1989). The survey also distinguishes between fulltime and part-time employment, as well as employment in related fields, which accounts for many of the remaining broadcasting majors. Some 15 percent were unemployed at the time the 1986 study took place.

[3]This is not to suggest that announcing is the only area where the radio industry could use a creative spurt; creative strategies in news, promotion, programming, and production are equally worthy of attention. Indeed, the fundamental paradigm of radio as a conveyor of music,

news, and commercial matter might be fruitful grounds for reevaluation. But since announcing is most often the entry point to a career in radio, this article is primarily concerned with the question of improving announcing creativity.

[4]This excerpt was transcribed from an undated cassette program produced by the Aircheck Factory of Wild Rose, Wisconsin entitled "John Quincy salutes the Greaseman." Contact the author for further source information.

[5]Other source areas for this kind of artist information include *Rolling Stone* or any of the other contemporary music magazines, and *USA Today's* "Life" section. A subscriber-based publication that provides artist bio information in a similar vein is *Galaxy*, published in Long Beach, California.

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